

# ISLAMIC INSURGENCY IN THE SAHEL

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My research focuses on the crisis of Islamic insurgency in the Sahel region. I am particularly interested in the socio-political and religious dynamics that contributed to the emergence of the crisis, and the factors of vulnerability and resilience in each of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.

The Sahel region is going through an important transformation. A region that was once known for its peace and stability has suddenly turned into a sanctuary of violence, kidnapping, suicide bombing, and the spread of radical jihadist ideologies. This sudden change has puzzled scholars, and challenged the existing paradigms for understanding the political and religious dynamics of the region. Mauritania, Mali and Niger are the three Sahelian countries that are on the frontlines of this crisis. These countries have each experienced military assaults, suicide attacks, kidnappings, and killing of civilians perpetrated by jihadists inside their territories. Yet all three have had different trajectories.

While the Malian state collapsed in 2012 in the face of the crisis and Niger struggles to maintain a precarious stability, Mauritania seems the first to have reached a post-Islamic insurgency period.

Over the course of the summer 2013, I conducted field research in both Mauritania and Niger to investigate their experience of the crises of Islamic insurgency. Mauritania appeared as the first Sahelian country to have successfully expelled the threat of jihad out of its territory. In fact, after six years (2005 – 2011) of intense counterinsurgency no terrorist attacks occurred on Mauritanian soil. This is all the more notable given that, prior to the onset of the Malian crisis, a number of factors suggested extreme vulnerability to jihadist activism, and seemed to set Mauritania apart from its Sahelian neighbors as the easiest prey for the jihadist enterprise. Surprisingly, despite the political instability that punctuated the period of the crisis, a combination of military, political, and religious strategies by successive Mauritanian governments

proved effective in fighting against the threat posed by jihadist movements and eventually led to the defeat of the jihadists and their withdrawal from their unsuccessful national front to join more promising ones in Libya and Mali.

In Niger my investigation revolved around the description of this country in the media as well as in officials' speeches as an "island of stability." Niger is, in fact, encircled by crises of Islamic insurgency across its borders: Boko Haram, Ansar al-Sharia, AQIM, and MUJAO. Yet despite its structural weaknesses and the spread of violence along its borders, Niger appears unexpectedly resilient. Contrary to the other frontline countries, Niger has avoided the emergence of indigenous cells of jihadist groups within its territory, and prevented the occupation of its territory by such groups. This unexpected performance is credited to the country's secularized Islam, its fairly operational and organized military, and the experience of handling Tuareg insurgencies, which allowed Niger's government to maintain tight control over the northern regions.

My ongoing project consists of a comparative historical analysis that traces down structural socio-political and religious dynamics that might explain the different trajectories taken by each of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger in the face of the crisis of Islamic insurgency.

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